DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 372 CS 003 705

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TITLE Reading in Mississippi: Problems and Promise.
PUB DATE Feb 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association Southeast Regional Conference (4th, Jacksonville, Florida, February 18-21, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; Elementary Education; *Federal Aid; Inservice Teacher Education; Reading Development; Reading Difficulty; Reading Habits; *Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; Secondary Education; *Teacher Certification; *Teacher Education; Team Teaching
IDENTIFIERS *Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I; *Mississippi

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses six problem areas affecting the reading of children in Mississippi. The problems are presented within the following categories: lack of a state-wide, publicly supported kindergarten program; multiteacher instruction in the primary grades; Mississippi's teacher-certification policy; guidelines for using Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I funds; preservice teacher preparation; and in-service teacher education. Suggested solutions or improvement are provided in each category. (RL)

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READING IN MISSISSIPPI: PROBLEMS AND PROMISE

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(From an address delivered at the Southeast Regional Conference of the International Reading Association, Jacksonville, Florida, February 20, 1976.)

When I was asked to discuss reading problems in Mississippi, I was initially reluctant, because of my rather brief period of residence in the state. I moved there in 1973 after five years of teaching in Florida, which was preceded by a dozen years in Michigan. However, my colleagues in reading argued that this would provide a perspective from which to view education in the Magnolia State.

I would like to talk specifically about reading problems in Mississippi, their causes, and what I believe needs to be done about them. I doubt if our difficulties are unique to Mississippi; some or all of them may be present in your own schools. Because of that, I'd like to provide a few minutes for your comments and reactions at the end of this discussion.

Based upon state-wide assessment tests in recent years, it is all too apparent that reading deficiencies among Mississippi children are extremely serious. State department of education statistics indicate that more than three-fifths of our students have a significant retardation of reading achievement. It has been estimated that well over a third of our secondary students are two or more years behind in reading---and that figure ignores the high dropout rate which removes many of our poorest readers before

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they reach high school. As you probably know, Mississippi has the dubious distinction of being the only state in the country which does not have a compulsory school attendance law. Despite this, it is estimated that 15 to 20 thousand of our high school students are non-readers. These gloomy figures suggest that a long, hard look at Mississippi's educational practices and policies would be most appropriate.

After considerable consultation with teachers, administrators, and other college personnel, I have selected six areas of difficulty in Mississippi which are affecting children's reading.

Kindergarten

Probably the first negative factor which affects the reading potential of Mississippi children is the lack of a state-wide, publicly supported kindergarten program. As I look at the situation, I see a serious dichotomy: middle-class children, who are already advantaged, gain an additional boost by being sent to one or even two years of private, tuition-supported kindergarten.

Children from disadvantaged homes, however, do not have this kind of early experience. Some of them, it is true, attend a Head Start program. But Head Start is not the equivalent of kindergarten when it comes to preparation for later reading instruction. The major thrust of Head Start, as I have seen it operate in Mississippi, is toward social and economic goals. Children receive attention for a variety of physical ills, and are cared for while parents work. But the training of the personnel of the typical Head Start center leaves a great deal to be desired. I visited one center last fall, and the director bragged to me that for the first time all of her staff members had graduated from high school.

Obviously, these individuals, no matter how well intentioned, could not have had the kind of capabilities in early childhood education which we expect of trained kindergarten teachers. In essence, the situation in Mississippi as it now exists tends to increase the differences between the children who have and the children who don't.

A well-planned program of early childhood education, conducted under the auspices of the state board of education, is needed to counter the effects of early poverty and deprivation. Until all the children in Mississippi come to school with adequate vocabularies, effective social skills, and appropriate orientation toward learning, elementary school reading performance will suffer.

Departmentalization

Mississippi schools suffer from another self-imposed problem which I believe is hampering the reading achievement of elementary school children. At the point when desegregation of the public schools became inevitable, the majority of school districts in Mississippi elected to abandon the self-contained classroom. The politics of the move are understandable: many school boards reasoned that parents would be more likely to leave their children in the public schools if they did not have to spend the entire school day with a teacher of the opposite race. As a result, the schools today utilize a remarkable variety of devices to achieve that end: departmentalization, teaming, classes that move in toto every 9 weeks, and so forth. I can sympathize with the thinking that went into this kind of planning. But I have also observed the effect of multi-teacher instruction on primary grade children. It is a truism that "when

everyone is responsible, no one is." This seems to be the story of reading instruction in our schools. Too many teachers deal with each child, and regardless of their good intentions, they cannot provide the instruction, the reinforcement, and the encouragement which were commonplace in the self-contained classroom. The students who are most in need of help are further divided between the reading teacher in the regular classroom and a Title I reading teacher, who frequently teaches a program or a set of materials totally divorced from the district program.

Any good remedial reading teacher can testify that about 75% of the success of any remedial program lies in the affective domain: that is, a child's self-concept must be built along with his skills. But when a pupil is shunted from one teacher to another, for a total of five or six in the school day, he gets the feeling that no one really cares very much. And certainly, a teacher who sees 120 or 130 children each day cannot be as cognizant of the needs of each one as can the teacher who has her own group of 25 or 30.

I understand from friends in some of the larger communities in Mississippi that the trend is reversing. Some school districts are returning to the self-contained classroom, at least for first, second, and third grade. I applaud this trend, and I can only hope that it accelerates in the near future. Six or seven-year old children are not ready to pass from room to room, from teacher to teacher, like secondary students. I really believe that young children need to identify with one caring adult, who can be responsible for their overall educational development. Reading, which must be the primary concern of the early elementary years, needs the consistent nurturing which can best be given in one room by one teacher.

Teacher Certification

From my point of view as a college teacher, the policies of the state department of education both help and hinder the improvement of reading instruction in Mississippi. At the undergraduate level, the effect is positive: the Class A, or Bachelor's Degree, Certificate, permits students to take what is known as a "concentration" in reading---a total of 12 semester hours of course work. A majority of our students at Ole Miss elect to do this. This provides them with considerably more background in teaching reading than most of us had in our undergraduate preparation.

At the same time, the regulations covering graduate work in reading are extremely inflexible, and permit little initiative on the part of the universities in developing programs to meet the very specific needs of our graduate students. Of the fifteen hours of reading course work required as a part of the Masters degree, twelve hours are mandated by the Teacher Certification Office. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build adequate experience and instruction in diagnosis, remediation, clinical work, and language development, or to provide help in correlating reading with the other language arts and with content area courses.

However, the state department has created an even bigger problem with its regulations concerning the employment of teachers under the state's minimum foundation program. Under this program, a teacher may be paid an increment for the master's degree only if he or she is employed specifically in a position which requires that degree. Thus, for example, a second grade teacher who completes a master's degree in reading cannot be paid for the degree because she is not a reading teacher. It does not matter that 75%

of her day may be spent in reading or reading-related instruction. Only if she is hired as a "reading teacher" will she receive an increase in salary for her graduate degree. Logically enough, the effect of this regulation is to discourage classroom teachers from pursuing advanced training in reading.

Although it affects a smaller number of graduate students, an even bigger source of frustration for me is the state's inflexibility in permitting students to seek degrees in different areas of education. If a teacher with a master's degree in elementary education wants to work toward a specialist's degree in reading, it is necessary for her to first complete the course work required for a master's degree in reading. This is a most effective deterrent, since it therefore requires from 54 to 57 semester hours beyond the master's degree to complete the specialist degree. In addition, she must work for 3 years under the master's degree in reading before the specialist degree will be reimbursed on her salary schedule. I don't know how wide-spread this certification practice is in the other southern states, but it is not the rule in the northern states with which I am familiar. If I may use a personal example, I have a bachelor's degree in English, a master's in guidance and counseling, a specialist degree in reading, and a doctorate in elementary education. I have found this pattern of preparation to be most helpful, as each area of study provided new insights into different aspects of children's learning. But this would not have been possible in Mississippi. In fact, if I were teaching in a public school right now, rather than at the University level, I could

only be certified in English and guidance.

The net effect of this lockstep certification policy is to limit drastically the number of people with advanced degrees in reading through sheer economic necessity. Only a relatively few school districts have staff members with extensive backgrounds in reading, and the majority of these are employed under one of the federal programs.

It appears to me that this is a problem which could be solved easily by a simple policy change at the state department level. It would not, in my judgment, cost the state any additional money; some teachers would just shift the emphasis in their degree work to reading, as opposed to general elementary courses.

ESEA Title I

Another mixed blessing for reading in Mississippi is the ubiquitous Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This act has provided millions of dollars worth of materials and equipment for the improvement of reading instruction in Mississippi which would never have been provided by the state or by local communities. I spend a great deal of my time working with pupils and teachers in rural school districts in north Mississippi, and I am very much aware of the extent to which these schools are dependent upon federal funding. In the twenty or so schools which I visit regularly, the reading supervisors, all of the remedial reading teachers, and nearly all of the reading program materials, aside from the basal readers, are paid for with Title I funds. One of the most serious concerns of the principals and superintendents in the area is the erosion of Title money each year. Most will readily

agree that without Title I they would have no remedial or corrective reading at all.

Nevertheless, Title I is not entirely without its drawbacks---shortcomings which, in my estimation, detract from the good that it does accomplish. First of all, although the funding is from the Federal government, the guidelines for the day by day operation of local projects come from the state level. In the short time that I have been in Mississippi I have seen three different sets of annual directives that have required considerable rejuggling of the local programs. Although the national goals remain the same, the acceptable pursuit of those goals seems to vary widely from year to year. At first, we were told to concentrate on helping those children who had the most severe reading disabilities. Another season brought an emphasis on demonstration rooms--complete with carpeting, carrels, and audio-visual equipment, while other Title teachers in the same building worked with discarded materials from the school's used book room. This year, the stress has been placed on "producing measurable gains." As a result, most districts have carefully selected their Title I pupils, not from the group with the most serious reading problems, but from a group judged to be most likely to succeed. I suppose that a case can be made for all three of the efforts mentioned, but the constant changing tends to keep administrators, Title I supervisors, and teachers alike in a state of apprehension and confusion. Many school people dread the visits from the state Title supervisor, who is liable to find that last year's approved practices are now "out of compliance with the

Federal Act."

A few minutes ago I was complaining about the rigidity of the state's certification requirements as a factor in discouraging teachers from seeking additional course work in reading. Title I, unfortunately, has the same effect by being too lax in its requirements. A Title I reading supervisor, for example, need not be trained in either reading or supervision. Standards are left entirely to the local administration. Some schools, especially in the cities, make an effort to employ the best reading specialists available. But in many rural areas of the state, the "good ol' boy" philosophy prevails. Title I requires only that the supervisor have a master's degree--content unspecified.

Teachers hired from Title I funds may be even less qualified. In some districts, the Title I teachers are the least competent members of the staff--placed in remedial reading on the theory that they would do the least harm there. I have conducted in-service programs for some of these teachers, and have found tremendous variations in attitude, interest, and teaching ability. In two specific instances that I can recall, I was teaching the use of diagnostic tests, and came across several teachers who themselves could not read above a sixth grade level. In some north Mississippi schools the majority of Title I teachers are not graduates but student teachers, who are paid $90 a month for their services. I do not believe that any of the situations cited does the best that can be done for Mississippi's children.

If the state department of education is going to continue its

restrictive practices in regard to reading teachers, then I would like to see Title I follow the same path: that is, to only permit the hiring of staff members qualified in the subject being taught. This would insure that some members of each school staff had advanced work in reading.

Undergraduate Pre-Service Preparation

I would like to turn to the problem of the pre-service preparation of teachers. At the outset, I must admit that I can speak with certainty only about the program in my own institution. However, I have heard presentations by colleagues from the other universities, and I have done inservice work with their recent graduates. I believe that my comments have pretty general application.

In my experience, one of the basic flaws in our undergraduate program is this: middle-class white students are taught how to teach middle-class white children by middle-class white professors (who have taught only middle-class white children). But our public schools contain from 30% to 99% black children, whose backgrounds, needs, motivations, and expectations may be quite different. Since desegregation has been a relatively recent phenomenon, many of our upper division undergraduates have had little or no contact with black contemporaries. I find that our students have considerable sympathy for black children, but not much real understanding of the cultural and environmental differences which may affect their learning.

The actual content of the reading courses at the undergraduate level may also be a hampering factor. I mentioned earlier that I was

pleased that most of our students complete 12 semester hours of course work in reading, and I am. But I am concerned that the content of these courses may not prepare our graduates to reach their future pupils. In my judgment, the reading courses are almost entirely aimed at teaching developmental reading to average pupils who are approximately on grade level. But, as already noted, state-wide assessment tests indicate that more than 60% of our public school children are significantly handicapped in reading. I strongly believe that we need to add a large component to our undergraduate programs to help future teachers deal with the very real problems of severe reading retardation which we know they will encounter. We need to teach them how to work with the second grade girl who speaks only in words or short phrases, and with the eight grade boy who does not know the alphabet. We must provide them with techniques for teaching oral vocabulary, for providing concrete and vicarious experiences to enhance reading comprehension, and for motivating children who are not academically talented.

There seems to be a heavy emphasis in Mississippi teacher-training programs on traditional, textbook oriented instruction. In reading, this means that the basal reader is the major means of instruction. I am not opposed to basal reading instruction, but frequently in practice this results in the kind of reading program all too familiar to all of us: three-group round-robin oral reading. I usually refer to this in one of two ways: either it is the barbershop method, where the teacher simply has the children take turns reading a paragraph out loud, or the vulture method,

where she cruises overhead ready to pounce on the unwary child who has lost his place or who does not appear to be paying attention.

This preoccupation with the basal reader in teacher preparation courses seems to be accompanied by a great deal of emphasis on letter-by-letter phonics. Probably within any group of teachers we could start quite an argument about analytic versus synthetic approaches to reading. But I personally feel that a program of sounding and blending individual letters is questionable when many of the children can neither pronounce nor discriminate many of the standard English phonemes.

I believe that we need to teach our undergraduates to use a multiple approach to reading instruction; that is, to be able to vary their methods and materials to meet the needs, the abilities, and the learning styles of the children with whom they will work. We must dispel at the very beginning the notion that they will be able to put all of their pupils in one or two levels of a basal reader and have them all make satisfactory progress at the same rate. In brief, I believe that we must equip our students to do more than give lip service to the concept of individualized reading; we must teach them to be diagnostic teachers of reading for whom the child, not the textbook, is the basic element in the instructional process.

In-Service Education

The last of my areas of concern about reading instruction in Mississippi is perhaps the most sensitive one, because it deals with practitioners in the field. To some extent, this is a continuation of my discussion of pre-service education: after all, the in-service teachers of today are yesterday's undergraduates.

The small town and rural administrators with whom I deal often seem to regard teachers like new cars: they come shiny and new and ready to go from the factory, and need only fuel and an occasional oil change to do the job. In-service training for teachers is generally considered as a frill, an expense which can't be justified, because, after all, the college taught them how to teach. Providing teachers with support, information, and a regular infusion of new ideas seems unnecessary to some; they feel that the most important thing about teaching is keeping order.

When in-service programs are presented at rare intervals, they are usually conducted after school hours, and generally feature the sales representative or consultant from a publishing or audiovisual equipment company. For all too many teachers in North Mississippi, for example, an in-service program has come to mean a visit from a teaching machine salesman.

The most pressing need, in my opinion, is for practical assistance for older teachers who are both the products and the victims of the old dual school system. Caught up in the rapid flow of changes in the schools in the late 1960's and early 1970's, many of these teachers seem bewildered by children they do not understand and parents and principals they fear.

These teachers, and they are both black and white, need in-service education to come to grips with the problems that they must face every day: problems of classroom management, of room organization, and of selecting appropriate materials for their children. They need to be

assisted in discipline to find alternatives between candy and the paddle. And, most of all, they need to learn better ways of teaching children to read. Following in the footsteps of their teachers before them, they push, pull, or carry their pupils through a graded sequence of books year after year, passing those who "finish," and retaining those who do not. When I first arrived in Mississippi I could hardly believe it when I discovered that some schools had a 40% retention in first grade. Even now, it bothers me when a child I am testing in the Ole Miss Reading Clinic tells me that he "failed twice and was kept back." Teachers and administrators need help in discovering other ways of coping with the ranges of human abilities which present themselves in elementary reading classes.

At the same time, the new teachers should be exposed to a continuing program of in-service education to forestall their emulation of their older colleagues. It would be a shame to let today's enthusiastic, child-oriented young teachers degenerate into bored and discontented job holders.

Some districts are able to provide in-service education in reading for their teachers through the work of their own reading supervisors, while others hire outside consultants to put on programs in the district. Still others encourage teachers to return to the college or university classroom to learn new skills or up-date old ones. It seems to me that any of these approaches can be effective; what is most important is the extent to which the whole idea of in-service work is given administrative support. If the principal values reading highly, and stresses the importance of continuous development of the instructional skills

of reading teachers, then in-service programs can produce valuable gains. But where the administrative climate toward improvement of the reading program is negative, efforts are generally in vain.

As I described each of the problems which I see as affecting reading in Mississippi, I have tried to suggest briefly the direction which I personally think changes should take. And while some of the shortcomings which I have mentioned are serious, none are insurmountable. Economic growth is the key to much of the needed improvement in Mississippi schools: the state is poor--fiftieth in the nation in per capita income--and more money is needed to do some of the things which should be done.

Yet the potential is there: we do not have the crowded ghettos or the dehumanizing urban blight of many states; there is little pollution, and the streets are safe to walk on. Desegregation of the public schools, though bitterly opposed in the beginning, is largely an accomplished fact--without riots, police, or tear-gas. And we have dedicated teachers--overworked, underpaid, and often undereducated--but nonetheless dedicated, warm, friendly people who want their pupils, black and white, to succeed. They believe that reading is the answer to better education, and that education is the long-term solution to Mississippi's problems. And I agree with them.

Thank you.